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Goethe—200 Years Ago and Today

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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THE REVIEWING STAND is a weekly radio forum presented by Northwestern University. The program was first broadcast by Station WGN, Chicago, October 14, 1934. It has been on the air continuously since that time, originating in the WGN studios, and, since 1935, carried by the stations of the Mutual Broadcasting System. THE REVIEWING STAND presents members of the Northwestern University faculty and distinguished guests from business, government, education, and the press in round table discussions of contemporary problems—the questions that are in the news. The program is under the direction of James H. McBurney, Dean of the School of Speech, Northwestern University; Miss Myrtle Stahl, Director of Educational Programs, WGN, Chicago; R. E. Buchanan, Public Relations Director of Radio, Northwestern University.

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Goethe—200 Years Ago and Today

MR. BUCHANAN: What can we learn from the life and philosophy of Goethe?

MR. JANTZ: Goethe was so far ahead of his time in many respects that only in the Twentieth Century are we beginning to grasp more truly what he was driving at.

MR. GOEDSCHE: This is, I am sure, what the great American poet, Emerson, had in mind when he said, "The old, eternal genius who built this world has confided more to this man, Goethe, than to any other."

MR. REHDER: And in addition, it seems to me, Goethe offers positive formulation of a humanistic philosophy which may serve as a beacon in the quest for a general comprehensive education in our time.

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MR. BUCHANAN: This year the American public has found itself in the midst of newspaper stories, memorial meetings, magazine articles, and radio programs about Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the famed German author and philosopher. The first tendency of many of us—and I certainly would include myself—is to wonder just why so much attention is being paid to someone who lived 200 years ago.

The force of answers to this question is rather startling.

Mr. Jantz, you seem to believe that we can still learn from Goethe. Do you mean that he may have presented some ideas we haven't yet discovered or fully explored?

Ideas Still Alive

MR. JANTZ: That, of course, would be very difficult to say, if we haven't explored them yet. But it is true that in the 20th Century we are gradually finding that Goethe made sense in places where the 19th Century thought he was making nonsense.

Some of his scientific work is an

example. He was an anti-Newtonian. Until Newton, the idol, fell, no one had any concept that Goethe might be right, but Eddington and others now seem to believe that what Goethe had to say should carry some weight.

MR. BUCHANAN: That leads, of course, to what you said, Mr. Goedsche, in using the words of Emerson to term Goethe a genius. Why is he so important to us after these 200 years?

MR. GOEDSCHE: You might say he is a universal man in the totality of his achievement. He prominently reveals a profound understanding of human welfare and happiness; and it is in his works that we again and again find potential forces of inspiration and of guidance.

MR. BUCHANAN: Are you speaking of these forces of guidance and inspiration, Mr. Rehder, when you refer to Goethe's relation to our educational system today?

Relation to Education

MR. REHDER: Definitely so. Goethe cannot be called an educator, and he never claimed to be an educator; but his work, particularly his *Faust* and two novels, *Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister*, deal with the problem of education of man, not in the direction of any particular specific profession, but in the direction of life as an art work. The results of these two novels are human characters who finally are able to master life, and that, it seems to me, is the value we are after in modern education.

MR. BUCHANAN: The interests of this man continually surprise me. Can we call him a philosopher, an author, a scientist, a musician? Mr. Jantz, just what did he do in his lifetime?

MR. JANTZ: He did just about everything. He proved himself as a statesman quite successfully. He was one

of the founders of the modern theatre. He engaged in scientific experiment in the field of botany, in the field of physiology, in the theory of color. He wrote biographies and histories. He was interested in practically everything that occurred in his day. He had one of the greatest private art collections of any man of his time. Above all, of course, he was a poet.

MR. BUCHANAN: Without being facetious, I wonder if we shouldn't make clear that the pronunciation of Goethe, which is difficult for me, is a confusing factor. Here in Chicago *Go-ee-thee* Street seems to be the general pronunciation. Are there others? What do you hear as pronunciations of Goethe?

MR. GOEDSCHE: In our classrooms we hear only the pronunciation we are trying to teach.

MR. REHDER: Before students learn, however, they pronounce it *Gay-tee*, but when they leave the classes they have the correct pronunciation.

'Mastery of Life'

MR. GOEDSCHE: I would like to come back to what Mr. Rehder said, speaking of the mastery of life. I think he touched upon one of the fundamental points of Goethe's philosophy of life—a mastery of life, which I am sure he did not envisage as an ultimate state of happiness and bliss, neither for the individual nor for the nation. But he envisaged, I think, this mastery of life—and this is important—a constantly renewed and never-ending effort on our part to strive for a fuller realization of life, that is, to strive toward a rich and free and creative life by means of an innate power.

MR. REHDER: Don't you think that what you define as the striving for the experience of fullness of living can be gathered into the term of metamorphosis of transformation, which seems to be the guiding concept in Goethe's own philosophy?

MR. BUCHANAN: What do you mean by this metamorphosis in his philosophy? I don't understand.

MR. REHDER: Goethe thinks that nature brings forth many things, each equipped with that form which serves its purpose best, and the purpose is to live, to exist, and to enjoy existence.

MR. BUCHANAN: To lead this full life we are talking about, to exploit to the utmost the capacities that we have?

'Fullness of Life'

MR. REHDER: Yes. However, that could easily be subject to the challenge of selfishness and egotism. I do not think that is entirely the case with Goethe. That fullness of life that we have been speaking about would be attained by creating a life which would be extremely valuable for others. And life in the service of others is the fulfillment of one's existence.

MR. GOEDSCHE: Does he not think in terms of realization of self-development, and thereby, of course, of a general, human improvement? Is this not expressed in the words of Faust when he says:

"Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Leben
Der taglich sie erobern muss."

"Freedom alone he earns as well as life,
Who day by day must conquer them anew."

MR. REHDER: Where would you put the accent? Doesn't it appear that the accent falls on the "*must* conquer them anew"?

MR. GOEDSCHE: I agree.

MR. REHDER: I think another example might be the existence of a plant. A plant fulfills its existence by unconsciously following the laws which have defined and determined its outer form. In contrast to that, Goethe would also conceive of human life as that of a plant, but to attain this purpose consciously seems to be a daily imperative which Goethe imposes upon every individual.

MR. BUCHANAN: As I understand it, he believed that throughout each day he should accomplish even the small-

est task to the best of his ability. Is that a logical interpretation of his philosophy, Mr Rehder?

MR. REHDER: That is right. I think it can also be illustrated by another quotation from *Faust*:

"Was due ererbt von deinen Vatern hast,

Erwirb es um es zu besitzen."

This means that mere inheritance does not qualify for the possession of goods, but the individual who has inherited has to merit it, too, by his own actions.

Merit and Aspiration

MR. GOEDSCHE: And the important thing is, it seems to me, that, as far as he is concerned, it is sufficient that a person strives, attempts to reach that goal. Think of the words of the angels who approve of Faust's wisdom:

"Wer immer strebend sich bemuht,
Den können wir erlösen.

Who ever aspires unweariedly
Is worthy of redeeming."

MR. BUCHANAN: If we can sum up this philosophy: Do the best everyday to the best of your ability and live the fullest of lives. I hate to put Goethe's philosophy into such barren words as that, but that is what it means to me.

MR. JANTZ: And to grow everyday, to continue to develop, and to add to the richness and fullness of life as Goethe did.

MR. BUCHANAN: Could we accuse Goethe of being a Pollyanna in this sense? Didn't he realize the problems and frustrations that all of us must face?

MR. JANTZ: Yes, Mr. Buchanan, he most assuredly did. He faced many of them many, many times. Often in his activities he was frustrated by the shortcomings of men or simply the tricks of fate. This conclusion he always came to: Go forward anyway. That is, there is always that, in spite of everything.

MR. BUCHANAN: You must surmount those obstacles, then? You have spoken, Mr. Jantz, about Goethe's

achievements in the field of science. What specifically were some of these, especially in relation to the Newtonian theory you were speaking of?

MR. JANTZ: I am no scientist, Mr. Buchanan, but as I understand it, in his theory of color Goethe was decidedly anti-Newtonian. And, of course, Newton could not be challenged during the 19th century. He was a god in that field, and it is really only recently that Goethe's more physiological approach to the theory of color has been seen to have quite a bit of cogency, quite a bit to be said in its favor.

His work in botany has been highly esteemed for some time. That was a positive achievement in his life. His interests in science were general, however.

MR. REHDER: Do you think, Mr. Jantz, that the results of Goethe's theory of color could be employed usefully in modern technology?

MR. JANTZ: Coming from the realistic point of view of just what the eye sees and how it reacts to colors, yes, most decidedly. He anticipated many of the physiological phenomena that are associated with vision in the way of color.

Relation to Music?

MR. BUCHANAN: Probably many of these achievements might have been well ahead of their times, yet today technology has changed so much that any man who can see into the future at all would have the qualities of genius of which Emerson speaks.

I am a bit confused, Mr. Goedsche, about Goethe's relation to music. Was he a musician himself?

MR. GOEDSCHE: I don't believe he was. Many of his poems are set to music by very famous composers, but he himself, although he enjoyed music—the works of Beethoven and others—was not much of a musician. What do you think, Mr. Jantz?

MR. JANTZ: No, he wasn't. His approach to music was that of appreciation. He was, for instance, long before the Bach revival, an ardent admirer of

Bach's music, at a time when Bach was out of fashion. But as far as being an active musician, no.

MR. BUCHANAN: Would we get that impression from the fact that Gounod made *Faust* into an opera, and therefore we think of Goethe writing *Faust*; *ipso facto* Goethe is a musician.

MR. GOEDSCHE: Yes, as a matter of fact Barbier wrote the words to Gounod's *Faust*, not Goethe.

MR. BUCHANAN: What about the modernity of this man? We have touched on that a bit. What was his effect, Mr. Jantz, on others, his contemporaries, some of the poets, the authors of his period? Did they pay court to Goethe?

MR. JANTZ: Yes, most decidedly. His contemporaries considered him a leader, but particularly the younger generations that came along as Goethe entered his maturity and reached old age. The romantic school looked to him more or less as its leader, and the novel, *Wilhelm Meister*, was highly admired.

Prestige Was Great

His prestige went far beyond the borders of Germany. He was a friend and correspondent of Byron, and on Goethe's last birthday the most famous living English writers sent him a present together with a letter. Sir Walter Scott, Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, and about a dozen others were included. All of them combined to pay tribute to the man whom they considered their master. Thomas Carlyle, among the English, was probably his greatest admirer.

MR. REHDER: Now, don't you think that it touches very closely upon a challenge that was raised against Goethe in the 19th Century, namely that of aloofness? Especially at the end of the 19th Century and in our century Goethe has been criticized for being an Olympian unapproachable, and perhaps with little sympathy for writers who were on their way toward perfection, but who could not develop under the withering brilliance that emanated from Goethe.

MR. JANTZ: That is very, very true, Mr. Rehder. As he was entering old age and had to protect himself, Goethe had a great task before him. He was the greatest tourist attraction in Weimar and, if he had not insulated himself by a certain amount of aloofness, he would have had no time for his own work. Every Englishman who came through Germany—and they seem to have come at that time by the dozens—wanted to see the great Goethe and at least exchange a few words with him. Conversations that we have recorded are quite varied. Some found him friendly and affable; others found him cool and aloof. Some were invited to come back; others were not. Apparently it depended upon the person.

MR. GOEDSCHE: In mentioning visitors, Mr. Jantz, perhaps we should also mention the great Napoleon, who came to Weimar to visit Goethe and is reported to have said about Goethe, "Voilà un homme!"—There is a man.

Cold, Aloof?

MR. REHDER: Goethe's unwillingness to be looked at by tourists in Weimar, I think, might be explained by another situation. Goethe was trying to educate his contemporary public to pay attention more to the thoughts and to the ideas that he had to present rather than to his own private personality. And he wanted to discourage that curiosity, the journalistic curiosity, about his private affairs. I recall rather a short, but impressive little statement in German:

"Nichts vom Verganglichen,
Wie's auch geschah!
Uns zu verewigen,
Sind wir ja da."

"Nothing of that transitory let us pay attention to, because we are here in order to make our existence permanent."

And so it seems to me that Goethe's own life was dedicated to the idea, that he devoted his own scientific and poetic efforts to it.

MR. BUCHANAN: His philosophy was

very much a part of his own life, then. He exemplified exactly what he said?

MR. REHDER: Oh yes, I should say so.

MR. BUCHANAN: To go on in that particular vein, we know certainly that with the comments of Napoleon, Emerson, and all the authors that you have mentioned, Mr. Jantz, that Goethe must have been a great man. But, he lived 200 years ago. Why should we pay homage to him today? What has he said that can affect my life? What particular bit of philosophy can I introduce into my being that might help me with my problems, or, word-wise, to help make this a better place to live?

'Planning Is Possible'

MR. JANTZ: Mr. Buchanan, that is quite an order, but if I say this: Goethe's very quality of anticipation, of really looking into the future, indicates to us that planning is possible, that it is possible to guide our lives and to guide our future destinies in such a way that will be both rational and beneficial.

MR. BUCHANAN: Would his concept of planning apply to government, a planned economy?

MR. JANTZ: Certainly not a planned economy. The very last scene of *Faust* on earth indicates quite the opposite. Faust there envisions the people whom he has settled in his new country as a free people who develop by a communal spirit of working together, and yet each one doing it voluntarily and individually. That, I should say is Goethe's major idea.

On the other hand, he had planned his new country so that corruption, disintegration, and other political maladies, should be kept away from it about as efficiently as possible in human society.

MR. REHDER: Mr. Jantz, I have the impression that his novel, *The Elective Affinities*, is a particularly good illustration of that idea of planning, planning which not only is directed against sickness, even mental sickness,

but also toward the regulation of one's private life. And in that respect, *The Elective Affinities* could be considered the first psychological novel of modern times.

'First Modern Novel'

MR. JANTZ: Yes, indeed, that is quite so. And one of our own American novelists has recognized that. Edith Wharton called *The Elective Affinities* the first modern novel. There is a good example of what Goethe can still mean to us in the present day.

MR. GOEDSCHE: I am reminded of one of the questions posed during my doctor's examination. One of the English professors asked me, "What kind of a banker was Goethe?" Obviously he referred to the invention of paper money in *Faust* years ahead of the introduction of paper money in actual circulation.

MR. REHDER: He must have been a good banker, because the only person who reacts sensibly to the paper money is the "Fool."

MR. BUCHANAN: It seems to me we are developing the picture that Goethe repeated the freedom of man very highly by continually planning to utilize the abilities of that man. But did he have any concept of the person who was not as talented as himself? Mr. Jantz, what would you say to the person who is not a scientist and a lyric writer and author? Can he live the life that Goethe would suggest?

MR. JANTZ: Mr. Buchanan, Goethe here as everywhere else has the answer. He has, for instance, in his *Faust* a place of great virtue and dignity for the person who can serve and follow. That person to him is a worthy person, a person who deserves immortality. At the end of the third act the leader of the chorus, the faithful servant of Helen, is represented as just such a person.

MR. BUCHANAN: What was the general outlook upon life of Goethe, then, would you say, Mr. Goedsche? Did he feel that we have a great future in this world?

Optimistic, Hopeful

MR. GOEDSCHE: Yes, indeed. Goethe's outlook upon life, which to him as well as to us now offers the opportunities for realizing great potentialities, was definitely hopeful and optimistic and full of joy to the end. I quote him again by saying:

"Wie es auch sei, das Leben, es ist gut!"

"However life be, it is good."

MR. BUCHANAN: I wonder, though if one without the particular talents of Goethe can accept that philosophy. Here is the real genius, and we are trying to apply his philosophy to that of any human being. Do you think, Mr. Rehder, that, *However life be it is good* would apply today with the problems of war and economic depression and that sort of thing?

MR. REHDER: That is a pretty comprehensive question. And I hesitate to answer it, being merely a representative of common man. But it seems to me such is the only possible answer that can be offered because the alternative would be nihilism. And Goethe from the very beginning of his poetic career expressed himself as the opponent of nihilism. Most impressively this is brought out, it seems to me, in the characterization in *Faust* of Mephistopheles who is not merely a spirit, a ghost, a specter, but a creation of a new man—imagination. And in that respect Goethe comes out strongly as a creative poet, whom so far in our discussions, I feel we have slighted a little. After all, it is his greatest metier.

MR. JANTZ: Yes, Mr. Rehder, you are quite right. After all the thing that has always appealed about Goethe, where we need no philosophy, where we need no particular elucidation or discussion, is the poetry of Goethe, the lyric poetry, and the wonderful depictions of human beings of every type and kind. They speak to everyone. They speak immediately. They are there. They are real.

Is Goethe Modern?

MR. GOEDSCHE: You asked a while ago, Mr. Buchanan whether Goethe is modern. I just remember *Hermann und Dorothea*, written 150 years ago, depicting the life and misery and the struggle of political refugees who came from France into Germany. It is as modern and as up to date as anything you can possibly read today, a description of unfortunate European refugees who have had to move from country to country.

'Goethe Was Realist'

MR. JANTZ: That brings up another point. With all Goethe's optimism, he was a true realist. For instance, he lived at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and he saw very well what it was coming to. There is a famous statement of his, "The 19th Century will be the century of the capable men." By that he meant that the men, the technicians, would narrow and specialize their education and their capabilities until there was a peril to a general culture, a general human approach, disappearing from the world. So, with all his optimism, he was not unrealistic in the least.

MR. REHDER: That is quite along the lines I tried to indicate at the beginning of our conversation, namely that Goethe's philosophy seems to be designed in the direction of a totality of an all-around comprehensive human education, and not in the direction of an education in a specialized field.

MR. BUCHANAN: Your discussion, gentlemen, has certainly bridged the years between Goethe's birth, 200 years ago, and today.

Goethe's ideas seem to me to have kept a freshness which makes them applicable to today's problems, as you have demonstrated, as if they had been written in yesterday's newspaper columns.

I believe we can learn from those ideas a respect for this great man of history, and that, whatever our problems may be, we might follow the ex-

ample of Goethe—if I can paraphrase it: Tackle it now, and devote yourself to its solution.

ANNOUNCER: Thank you gentlemen.

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Suggested Readings



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BERGSTRAESSER, ARNOLD *Goethe's Image of Man and Society*. Hinsdale, Ill., Regnery, 1949.

The author through his highly individual approach presents Goethe's Olympic genius and meaning for the 20th Century.

BIERMAN, BERTHOLD ed. *Goethe's World*. Norfolk, Conn., New Direction, 1949.

Excellent collection of letters introducing the reader to a new humanized Goethe. Much of the material used in the book has never been published before in English. Explanatory notes preface each excerpt.

CURTIS, LUDWIG, *Goethe's Wisdom and Experience*. New York, Pantheon, 1949.

Selections from Goethe's works illustrating his views on religion, nature, philosophy, morals, art, etc. The question of Goethe's value for our time is answered by Herman J. Weigand in his introduction.

FAIRLEY, BARKER *A Study of Goethe*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1948.

GOETHE, JOHANN WOLFGANG *Von Autobiography*. Washington, Public Affairs Press, 1949.

R. O. Moon's excellent translation affords an unusual opportunity to know this profound thinker during his first 26 years.

LEWISOHN, LUDWIG *Goethe: The Story of a Man*. New York, Farrar and Strauss, 1949.

The life of Goethe as told through letters and diaries of the poet and his friends. Lewisohn translated all the material himself.

MANN, THOMAS *Permanent Goethe*. New York, Dial Press, 1948.

Mann's introduction is a masterpiece of understanding precision. The volume contains selections from the best of Goethe.

NEVINSON, HENRY WOOD *Goethe, Man and Poet*. New York, Harcourt, 1932.

An excellent introduction to the poet's life and work.

SCHWEITZER, ALBERT *Goethe: Four Studies*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1949.
Schweitzer's homage to his idol.

STAWELL, F. M. and DICKINSON, G. L. *Goethe and Faust, An Interpretation*. London, Bell, 1928.

VICTOR, KARL *Goethe the Poet*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1949.

A scholarly work built on a clear understanding of Goethe as a man and creative artist.

The University of Chicago Round Table Number 579, Apr. 24, '49. "Goethe and Unity of Mankind Today."

Robert M. Hutchins, Reinhold Niebuhr and George N. Shuster discuss Faust and the importance of Goethe today. Selected passages highlight his thoughts on religion, ethics, science, etc.

Atlantic 183:71-5, Apr., '49. "Lyre and Mantle, Goethe: 1749-1949." LUCIEN PRICE.

Evolution of Goethe's *Faust*, which the author worked on throughout his life time.

Contemporary Review 175:29-34, Ja., '49. "Goethe's Faith." R. PRECHTL.

Goethe's attitude toward Christianity and metaphysics, with the need of justifying man's life to give it mobility and purpose.

Contemporary Review 175:283-9, My., '49. "Goethe on the English." J. LESSER.

Goethe prophesied that the English would outshine the Germans through their good sense and good will.

Education 69:607-15, Je., '49. "Goethe and the English Reader." ERWIN RESCHER.

A condensed survey of the Master's chief works which indicate the significance of Goethe for today and tomorrow.

Nation 168:614-15, My., '49. "With Goethe in Colorado." JACQUES BARZUN.

Mr. Barzun suggests that Part II of Faust be read with the thought of comparison to our present day world problems.

New Republic 120:21-23, Feb. 21, '49. "The Discovery of Goethe." ALFRED WERNER.

How difficult it is to appreciate Goethe in translation.

New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review Jly. 31, '49. "What Does Goethe Say to America Today?" GEORGE N. SHUSTER.

Discussion of books that translate Goethe in the modern idiom.

New York Times Magazine 10:38-9, Je. 26, '49. "Goethe: Faust and Mephistopheles." THOMAS MANN.

The author highlights Goethe's world embracing greatness and love of mankind, and contrasts it to the nationalistic tendencies of Luther and Bismark.

Saturday Review of Literature 32:7-94, Je. 25, '49. "The Man in the Statue." VICTOR LANGE.

The reasons for renewed enthusiasm regarding Goethe are given through treatment. Sound judgment on the part of Lange adds interest to the highlights of Goethe's achievements and chief literary works.

Scientific Monthly 68:305-9, My., '49. "Poetic Scientist." CHARLES J. ENGARD.

Outlines Goethe's methods of approach to scientific questions and explains its importance to his writings as well as to future scientists.

The Yale Review Summer, '49. "Goethe: Science and Poetry." VICTOR LANGE.

Goethe foresaw the results of a world of scientific inhumanity and felt human dignity could only be preserved by the humanization of science.



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